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Studying Arabic in Morocco

モロッコでアラビア語を勉強

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Abstract

This Miscellaneous is a reflection and field trip report about the scene of teaching and learning Arabic as a foreign language in Morocco, as part of a project to write about the same topic in different Arabic speaking countries, hoping that it may be useful for foreign learners of Arabic. The visit was between 16th to 23rd of February 2020 and financed by the research money allocated by Osaka University to the writer.

The traditional places to study Arabic as a foreign language were usually related to Cairo-Egypt, Damascus- Syria, Amman-Jordan, and Tunis- Tunisia. Morocco was always among them with its unique location and language scene. It has more possibilities in geo-lingual conditions than in some other countries.

Keywords: Arabic, Morocco, Teaching Arabic, Language education

1. Introduction

Morocco is an Arab kingdom that lies in the far northwestern part of Africa. It is bordered by water from the north –Mediterranean- and west – by the Atlantic Ocean. It shares borders with Algeria which lies to the east of Morocco and Mauritania to the south. It has shared borders with Spain, which controls 2 enclaves in both Ceuta and Melilla. This location gives Morocco a key control on the entrance of the Mediterranean as it has the southern side of the Strait of Gibraltar. Through this strait, Arabs crossed the water to Spain in the beginning of the 8th century and returned in the 15th century. From Morocco, many travelers and merchant caravans crossed the great desert to African countries. The geographical face of Morocco has two big mountains that separate between its coastal west and the dry desert east.

The unique location of Morocco has developed a diverse population that blends Arabs, Berber, South European and African ethnicities with their languages and cultures. Morocco is famous for its nature, historical heritage, touristic places, natural resources and its agricultural products. All of these elements have made it a popular spot for trade between many countries. Morocco has stronger connections with the European Union (EU) than other countries but its business relations extend to

many countries outside the EU.

The infrastructure of Morocco was established during the time when it was a French colony, but it was well maintained and expanded more through the years after gaining its independence. One example can be found in the number of ports and airports that cover most of the landscape. In addition, its infrastructure connects the different parts of Morocco together.

The last few years has seen a huge development of the railway system by including a high speed service to the trains, as well as having a punctual service. I have personally used the trains for 8 days and I was able to recognize my destination by checking the arrival time on my ticket. Only one train was late for about 15 minutes, however, this delay was announced ahead of time. Train stations are a good front to the developing services as one can find shops, restaurants and money services there. One negative aspect would be the sanitation and function of the toilets on the trains.

The population of the kingdom of Morocco exceeds 36 million, most of which are children and youth. The majority of the population are Muslims sunnis. While there are about 1% of Muslim shi'is. And similar numbers for other religions in particular Jews. About 60% of the population live in urban areas. This means the work opportunities in the fields of mining and agriculture are not attracting the workforce. Even though the two activities can employ the available population.

Education is one of the biggest investments to Morocco, but the highly educated population struggle to find jobs. The unemployment rate among them is currently at 20%. The lack of employment opportunities and earning enough income to meet the high living expenses is a cause of individual and common unrest. That is why the royal project to create an agricultural middle class was created at the beginning of 2020.

The shortage of job opportunities and the feeling of unachievement is rising among new generations, which is causing them to seek work abroad or to migrate. The top two countries that they are turning to are France and Spain. They try to cross the Mediterranean either legally or illegally and sometimes there is a third destination which is the Gulf countries.

2. Language in Morocco

Morocco, like other Maghreb countries, has a type of population integrating Arabic speaking people with other groups whose mother language is Berber. They all receive national education which offers Arabic as the first language. For decades, the Berber speaking population were not able to learn in their mother language. It was recently acknowledged as a national language with possibility to be used in education and in media. Arabic is still dominant in the urban areas and it gives more chances to find work opportunities in an Arab country.

There are two variations of Berber. These variations are related to the two groups of people.

Arabic has a standard form in education, administration and media. While its dialects belong to the group of dialects of Maghrib.

French was the language of the coloniser and then the language of administration and communication. It still enjoys a prestigious position in society and is the first foreign language. For historical and geographical reasons, Spanish plays the same role albeit on a smaller scale.

There are many examples of borrowing and code switching in the spoken languages of Morocco. Many words are borrowed from French that makes it difficult for someone without a French background to understand basic and important things. The other possibilities of borrowed words depend on geographical or personal factors; if the person is in an area with Berber population, he can expect to find more cases from the local language; and if this person has worked in a Gulf country, it is then expected to hear him using vocabulary related to the place where he had lived. When Moroccans know that they are speaking to an Egyptian, they will recall their knowledge of the Egyptian dialect which is learned through the media.

3. Some characteristics of the society in Morocco

The society of Morocco as stated before, has many varieties. For religion, we can talk about the massive majority of Muslims. Although, they belong in general to the Sunni Islam with a Maliki background, they are different in their approach to their religion.

All types of outfits for men and women are observed in the streets. Hijab or covering the body of women is not the only option in the big cities. Urban areas are relatively safe and quiet with more respect for women.

The people of Morocco are friendly and nice to foreigners. They try to communicate with them and help them with day to day things. They do not try to mislead them for the sake of money except when it comes to the tourist areas and amongst taxi services.

The gap between the population in the age of work and the opportunities available makes people ready to accept any available job even if it is less than the qualifications they have. It also makes some people, especially from the younger generations, ready to leave their hometowns for the sake of work. Some move to other cities inside the kingdom while others seek more possibilities abroad.

The kingdom is working on its infrastructure and is trying to modernise its services. This modernization makes it easier for tourists to find their way from the airport into the different cities of the kingdom. Telecommunication services are readily available making it easy for foreigners to find their way in the Moroccan cities. It is also possible for one to have direct contact with people from the society that leads to a good chance for living and learning.

4. Arabic as a foreign language in Morocco

For business reasons, and for geographical reasons as well, many foreigners are travelling to Morocco where they have to stay for some time and they need to learn the standard language or the dialect to be able to live there. The location of the kingdom made it easy and reasonable for Europeans to travel to Morocco and study there. Morocco was also able to attract foreign visitors and learners who used to study in other Arabic speaking countries after the Arab spring. In 2011, Many students were evacuated from Tunisia and Egypt to continue their study in Morocco.

Although Morocco enjoys a good location and multi ethnic culture plus its heritage and famous sightseeing places, Morocco gained its high profile in teaching Arabic in the 21st century by investments from some Moroccans living abroad, returnees and even from other foreign cultural organisations working there.

There are several institutions offering Arabic courses for foreigners in the country. They can be language centers that offer different languages for their learners and among them Arabic. There are Arabic language centers that are already established only to teach Arabic. Language centers are following different rules of quality assurance according to their choices.

I conducted a visit to Morocco in February 2020 trying to see and interview teams working in language centers and language institutes in different universities. The visit came in a critical time surrounded by the news about the break of Covid 19 and its danger. I was lucky to reach there and leave before the national lockdown which came in March of the same year. The outcome of the visit can be mentioned in the following remarks:

National universities do not play a big role in the field of teaching Arabic as a foreign language. The Mohammed V de Rabat organised a workshop in February and invited the interested audience to attend but they do not have their output. They invited Professor Mahmoud Al-Batal from the American University of Beirut and professor Kristen Brustad from the Arizona University to run the workshop.

There are some language centers for teaching different languages and Arabic among them in more than one city in Morocco. Arabic language centers are also available everywhere and they teach only Arabic. they can be found in every big city along the west coast or in the depth of the desert. I had the chance to conduct meetings and visits to many centers that are located in Tangier, Fez, Rabat, Casablanca and Marrakech.

The quality is different and the target learners are not always the same. I can say that there were two places only with high standards in many things which are Qalam Wa Lawh in the Capital city of Rabat, and the Arabic Language Institute in Fez (ALIF). the former is a private institute owned by a Moroccan living in the United states while the latter is affiliated to the American Cultural

Centre in Fez which is a cultural center and non profit Organization. There is a third one called Lisan Arabi in Marrakech which is on the track for development.

One of the special characteristics of the language centers in the kingdom is that they make good use of the internet services in the social media as they try to approach the target learners through Facebook and Whatsapp applications. Some of the centers do not pay good attention to the websites, they rather hire people to reply and respond to the direct messages which they receive on their business accounts on social media.

The language centers in the kingdom of Morocco do not cooperate nor exchange information or organize gatherings and meetings. It was noticeable that they do not communicate and don't have enough information about each other. There are two exceptions again which are Qalam Wa Lawh and ALIF. Both centers strive to apprehend the other competitors and partners in the field, with a variation in the level.

It was apparent to me that some language centers I visited in Tanger have a specifically targeted type of learners, which are Muslims living in Europe. They approach them and invite them to study in Morocco and encourage them to go with their families. They may be offering them specific concepts about Islam as well.

In general, Qalam Wa LAWh and ALIF are welcoming both individuals and groups in university levels, researchers and others while other centers are more ready for individuals.

Many language centers are providing their students with pick-up and drop-off services from and to the airports. A pick-up service is a valuable option for newcomers who do not know the place, the culture, and the methods of payment and pricing, while the drop-off is not as beneficial if the learners have learned how to handle their lives in the country.

5. Teachers

Like many other places in the world, Arabic teachers for foreigners are thought to be of foreign language background. Managers and coordinators in the field still think that a native speaker of Arabic with some knowledge in another language may fit in the job and do it properly.

Programs for teacher training and development seemed of little interest for most of the places except the two big centers of Rabat and Fez where there is clear awareness of the importance and need for continuous training. It seems that accumulating experience through work and try-and-error make the most for training.

Very few teachers and managers can think and develop new teaching materials. Most teachers rely on using the available textbooks which they know from random experience. Many of them use dated textbooks and they do not even try to find out the new editions of the books they are using. A

clear example of that can be seen in Tanger Language center where they use books that go back to the early 1980s. Another example is in Ibn Ghazi Center in Fez where the coordinator of the Arabic Program there uses the textbooks and materials that he personally had used before in his internship in the United States when he was a graduate student.

6. Guidelines

During several meetings and interviews with service providers and managers in the different language centers, I noticed that most of them lack awareness of language learning guidelines and learning outcomes. Very little is known and less is adopted in most of the language centers. Only in Qalam wa Lawh in Rabat one can see a clear understanding of the guidelines and adoption of them within the programs. Although the owner and Manager of Lisan Arabi has some knowledge about the European guidelines (CEFR) because of his educational background while living in France, this knowledge is not reflected in the educational activities of his center. The absence of the guidelines in the language teaching and learning process makes the whole thing random and leaves the work to the textbook and its organisation. When these guidelines are missing we can expect assessment to be random and focusing only on the content of the course without a clear checking of the learning outcomes.

7. Extracurricular activities

Many language centers do not have extracurricular activities and they do not mind that. On the other hand, Qalam wa Lawh and ALIF think that integrating students in the society can be helpful. Both of them arrange lectures and invite guest speakers. They also take learners for visits outside the place and encourage speaking activities among learners of different levels or with other teachers.

ALIF invites and encourages learners to join speaking activities over lunch attended by teachers. They also try to give a chance for language exchange between Moroccan students studying English and foreigner students studying Arabic. The garden of the center plays a key role in many activities and it gives a free and friendly atmosphere for that. The library and the bookshop are also very useful and they give a chance for less controlled study time.

Qalam Wa Lawh gives similar chances to the learners with less ability to mix with native speakers inside the building as they have only foreigners. Still, the library is there and the chance to talk to other students is still available. They invite university professors and public figures to give common lectures to the Learners in Arabic that deepens their knowledge, not only about the language but also about its background culture.

Housing options for ALIF were based on helping the newcomers find suitable place, They recently added housing facilities for the students in a nearby house which they bought . Qalam Wa Lawh on the other hand gives a housing option in the next building with an access through the third floor. They also have a “host Family” option for those who want to experience being among natives. They also arrange for internship and volunteer programs for their learners when they are interested.

8. The offered courses

All language centers offer courses for standard Arabic while only some of them offer dialect courses. The centers which are targeting learners for religious reasons avoid teaching any dialect classes. Other elective courses could be found in the two big centers and in Lisan Arabi in Marrakech.

The course duration is regularly for one month. Qalam Wa Lawh can offer 2-week and 4-week courses. Semesters courses (4 months) are available in ALIF. Some classes are offered in the evening in Qalam Wa Lawh for residents who are there for work.

There are many programs for the summer and end of the year to meet the needs of university students coming in groups or on their own.

9. Final remarks

Morocco is a recommended destination to study Arabic for various purposes; its location, culture, society and cuisine. Arabic learners can find many activities and enjoy their time in a country that embraces foreigners and supplies modern and convenient services for them. The French language can be a barrier and a cause of frustration for those who do not speak it, however, people generally are kind, and helpful.

It is important to carefully choose a center that meets the learning needs of the learner/s and to evaluate the quality of education offered. Prices are notably varied, yet they should not be the solitary factor when making a decision.

The location of the center is similarly crucial. The centers that offer high-quality education are usually located on main streets and known to the neighborhood, while the low quality and low profile ones are in small places, off the main roads, and are not known to the people around them. The exception is Lisan Arabi; It is quite distant from the main street of Marrakech, yet a reliable place.

Reading the reviews on the center while searching is recommended. Centers that have no websites or having only social media accounts are not the best choice.